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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the role of information in the planning and managing of intergenerational programs, this paper argues that two types of information--formal/objective and personal/subjective--must be addressed in relation to the problems of aging members of our society. These two types of information are characterized via illustrative stories: the "equation," which pertains to scientific information and our responsibility for its use, misuse, or manipulation; and the "parable," which refers to personal information expressing cultural forces, poetic vision, narratives, and fantasy. In the case of formal/objective information, it is suggested that there needs to be more effective dissemination of current information useful to both the elderly and their support networks, as well as greater cooperation between gerontological researchers and practitioners to make more relevant information available through health and social programs, education, and libraries. In the case of personal/subjective information, it is argued that an intuitive understanding of the cultural and spiritual needs of older persons and empathy in interpersonal communication are as important as the provision of factual information. It is suggested that the ability to make contact with people at the cultural level with stories, humor, and fantasy, is an important way to interact while preserving the identity and dignity of the aged individual. (42 references) (EW)

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THE EQUATION AND THE PARABLE

OR

THE TWO KINDS OF INFORMATION

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PRESENTED AT THE GRANDREADING WORKSHOP,

on Intergenerational Program Development

CANANDAIGUA, NY, MAY 21,1987

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Marta L. Dosa

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

I am pleased to have the opportunity to share with you my thoughts on intergenerational programming. To bring together older people with children or teenagers is no small challenge. What are our expectations? Who will benefit? Do we begin with considering the psychological or financial factors? Can we define "intergenerational programs" any better than we can define the concept of "young," the process of "aging" or the operational meaning of "generation?"

Based on the economics of an aging society, some authors speak of a resentful younger generation that will have to bear the burden of cost for the increasing number of people 65 or older (1). Are these economists too pessimistic, or are our assumptions that the old and the young have something to offer to each other too optimistic?

Many of you in the audience have had experience in this field. I believe that we all have hope that intergenerational programming can work. We have hope and a great many questions. We need information and the opportunity to share experience.

My talk will focus on the role of information as the basis of planning and managing intergenerational programs. I have been thinking about this topic, and each time I wondered how I would define "information," two images came to my mind. So I decided to entitle my talk "The Equation and the Parable," symbolizing two kinds of information that have a powerful influence on our lives: formal, structured, scientific information consisting of facts that can be tested and validated, and spontaneous, unstructured, personal information encompassing subjective perceptions and poetic imagery. The first kind of information resides in books, databases, videoprograms and other products of the intellect and technology. The second kind of information flows from

person to person, from grassroots network to grassroots network. When we have to figure out something, we try to find answers. We search for clearcut facts, for unambiguous logic. But answers sometimes unfold slowly, gradually, or are beyond our ability to understand their evolution. Such answers, often full of contradictions, may be expressed only in images or symbolic narratives.

What are these two kinds of information and how can they help us to perceive the many good, shared and mutually supportive experiences which the old and the young have to offer each other?

First, I would like to tell you about two scenes that have led me to see the duality of the Equation and the Parable. There are many other kinds of information, but let me speak of only these two, the scientific and the personal.

The first story takes us to an airplane, a long overnight flight where I am trying to catch up on my sleep. The white-haired gentleman next to me turns out to be a physicist who has a few very special things to say about research and the use of information. Soon I forget about sleep; I am listening with deepening attention. He is talking about the inner conflict of the first atomic scientists whose research led to the development of the atomic bomb. Isn't science supposed to be politics-free? How can scientists bear the burden of destruction caused by their research, by their data? It sounds primitive, he says, but an equation became a bomb.

My fellow passenger on this flight reminds me of an element in information provision that we often forget: individual responsibility for the use and application of information. In the process of retrieving answers from our databases and libraries, we tend to assume that the institution rather than the individual bears the responsibility for whatever happens with the information we have obtained. But those of us who work in human service organizations, educational programs or libraries, know that we are knowledge providers. We create, transfer, and often translate knowledge into its direct impact on the life of the recipient. In every situation when we originate or disseminate information, we bear a certain responsibility for its use, misuse or manipulation.

It was by this chance encounter that I became aware of the article by Jacob Bronowski in which he wrote:

> The world is not a fixed, solid array of objects, for it cannot be fully separated from our perception of it. It shifts under our gaze, it interacts with us, and the knowledge that it yields has to be interpreted by us... There is no way of exchanging information that does not demand an act of judgment... (2).

Remembering this scene I always think of the Equation that symbolizes research, development, data resources and formal information structures. They are, without a doubt, essential for our work.

The second story which I want to tell you takes us to a ship, a converted old battleship that carries post-World War II "displaced persons" to the United States. It is 1951 and I am under the deck of that ship with some hundred people. Next to me is an Italian grandmother on her way to join her family in New York. She is terribly seasick, as most of us are. All day she has been calling for her patron saint and begging the angels to take her away. We gather around her; she might be dying.

But twilight comes and above us on the deck an Italian boy starts strumming his guitar. And he sings. The song pours down through the open door and a strange transformation takes place in our passenger. She is so small and shriveled, you hardly notice when she stands up and gets out of bed. She is not calling the angels, she is quite happy right here on earth. She begins to turn around and around... She climbs upstairs... now she dances on the deck, a tiny silhouette, full of energy, against the wide sky.

On that ship, another kind of information transfer occurred. There was magic and an almost premordial flow of energy from the music to the old woman and from her to the rest of us, a sort of information flow that has turned that moment beautiful for all of us even if we understood it poorly. The second kind of information cannot be captured by systems and cannot be expressed by surrogates such as citation forms or abstracts. It has to do with cultural forces and poetic vision, narratives and fantasy. We can retrieve it only by listening with an

inner ear. But clearly, on that ship, it had a powerful healing message. John Dominic Crossan called a parable a paradox formed into a story (3). The Parable, then, symbolizes for me information that reduces uncertainty without giving an answer.

The stories of the Equation and the Parable suggest that the information we receive from our environment cannot be complete unless it includes both formal/objective and personal/subjective messages. Let's now turn to the contributions these two kinds of information make to professional planning and program development.

In recent years, certain key issues emerged in geriatrics, gerontology and health care that left their mark on the professional literature. I will refer only to a few examples: emphasis on demographic, socioeconomic and other statistical data; health care economics; informal caregivers and support-networks of the elderly; professional ethics; technological advances, and interdisciplinary approaches in practice and research.

Demographics and projections belie any argument for public policies that would mandate the reduction of programs for older persons. Since the turn of the century, the number of individuals 65 or older has been steadily growing in proportion to the rest of the population. In 1900, 4 percent of the population was 65 or above; in 1960, it was 9.2 percent and in 1985, 12.4 percent. The estimated figure for 2030 is 21 percent, and for 2050 it is 22 percent (4). Nowhere is the impact of this growth as crucial as in health care. In no other aspect are older persons more

threatened by financial disaster than by the rising cost of medical interventions. Concerns include the inequity of economic status, long-term care and home-based alternatives, prospective payment systems such as DRGs (Diagnostic Related Groups), health insurance, and longevity and the quality of life (5). The U.S. General Accounting Office has warned that a conflict between the older population's growing need for government subsidies and the federal government's need to reduce expenditures is inevitable (6). In a recent study, the U.S. Office of Technology Assessment identified dementia, especially Alzheimer's disease, as a major problem with nearly 1.5 million Americans suffering from severe dementia and another 1-5 million from milder cases (7).

The lack of equity in living conditions causes particular concern to all advocates of the elderly. Researchers have identified severe disparities in the quality of life during the aging years not only between high income and low income brackets, but also between ethnic groups and other parts of the population, and between various age-related groups (8, 9, 10). In view of persuasive figures and projections, where are the solutions? I believe that many legislative and other proposals underway - alternatives to current long-term care models, incentives for family care, more emphasis on the prevention of disease and disability - imply a new need for the participation of people of all age groups in policies, improved communication between different age groups, and increased cooperation among specialists.

Program developers have an abundance of statistical sources at their disposal. However, note that in spite of the growing number of economic and social studies about the elderly, we have not yet met the need for a national data bank that would provide up-to-date information on the actual living conditions of older people (11).

The significant role of informal caregivers and support networks has been discussed by gerontological studies (12). The formation of person-to-person links for mutual help, experience sharing, and the pooling of neighborhood influence represent a strong trend in most of our societal activities that have been recognized as a new paradigm (13). In Syracuse, we have seen community support services in the form of a Health Information Sharing Project (HISP) in health care and gerontology (14). Among several kinds of institutional cooperation, resource sharing by public libraries has been highlighted by Theodore Roszak:

> Here, then, in the libraries of the nation, we have an existing network spread across the society, stationed in almost every neighborhood, and in the charge of experienced people who have always honored a strong ethic of public service (15).

Roszak's reference to professional ethics is not an isolated example. There is a deep undercurrent of concern in our society about the responsibilities of professionals as gatekeepers and intermediaries in health and social care organizations and in information services. The speed and flexibility of computers, the possibility of merging several patient and client files, and research in artificial intelligence applicable to information systems raise new questions about the choices people with information-power can make for other people. The confidentiality of records, access to files by those represented by the data, and modes of the data collection itself are receiving renewed and often anxious attention. New governmental regulations spawn new information-related responsibilities such as medical record keeping for DRGs in hospitals. Is society ready? Are policies of the nation, of the states and of local institutions adequate for the handling of technological capabilities? Even if society is not ready, individuals must face ethical responsibilities in information handling day by day. Counseling of the elderly creates situations where the integrity of the counselor as a source of enabling information is a crucial factor (16).

Widespread use of computers and teamwork of researchers or practitioners of different backgrounds are closely related trends. Electronic mail and message systems make joint projects, and the sharing of reports, manuscripts of papers, and notes about spontaneous ideas a great deal simpler. The dissemination of current information by libaries in the form of bibliographies or newsletters has become more

prompt and cost effective. The most positive development in the long history of human struggle to postpone death is not medical technology, organ transplants, new drugs or new diagnostic information systems. It is the trend toward interdisciplinary teams in professional practice and research. Team members bring not only different skills but also different philosophical views to bear on the solving of problems. Thus, efforts today are directed not only at the physical extension of life. The question of <u>how</u> people spend their "extra" years and how to prevent social isolation and spiritual desertification in old age is finally coming into focus.

Technology is not only machinery, it is also the judicious application of new knowledge. I will always remember the contemplative question posed by David Davin, M.D., a primary care physician in reference to lifelong use of alcohol, tobacco, and the wrong food:

> Could it be that the public's expectation of what medicine can do vis-a-vis the provision of artificial and bionic organs and other technology has allowed the public to believe that a chronically poisoned human body can at any point be restored to normalcy at bargain basement prices? (17).

I would like to close this part of my talk with two recommendations:

First, better cooperation between gerontological researchers and practitioners is essential for making relevant knowledge available through health and social programs, education and libraries. Second, federally sponsored large-scale information centers and clearinghouses should develop contacts with local information services provided by small libraries, nonprofit organizations and advocacy groups in order to assure the effective dissemination of current information useful to the elderly and their support networks.

In the second part of my presentation, I will argue that an intuitive understanding of the cultural and spiritual needs of older persons and empathy in interpersonal communication are as important as the provision of factual information. The creativity of the elderly is a precious resource that needs to be nourished for the benefit of each individual and of society. The effect of releasing the creativity of the old and the young in a joint program could be felt throughout homes, neighborhoods and entire communities. Yet, it is increasingly difficult to initiate and organize intergenerational activities. The real problem is how to reach and involve the elderly. We are familiar with barriers to communication such as stereotyped images of the aging, physical and cultural isolation, financial hardship, frailness, lack of opportunities to make contacts, and the tendency in advanced age "to give up." Caregivers and neighborhood networks must become more aware of programs. An empirical study of home care of the elderly by relatives found that

"when asked, 80 percent of the caregivers felt that information about community resources would be helpful" (18). However, the real test of an intergenerational program in a senior center, nursing home, school or library, will be the response of older persons themselves. How do we get to know them? How do we talk with them at the personal rather than at the "client" level?

I believe that the second kind of information, symbolized by the Parable, is our path to people, not only to their doorstep, not only to their bedside, but into their trust. It is outright impossible to involve somebody in a program unless a relationship of trust and openness exists between participant and organizer. Counselors of the elderly can communicate to their clients information about services, eligibility and costs. They can also gather from the elderly data such as name, address, age and economic status. The exchange of such factual information only reinforces the usual dependency relationship between client and counselor. Similarly, librarian and library user may never break out of a formal mode of interaction. We often feel that more probing into a client's or reader's thoughts and expectations would be an intrusion of privacy.

However, our ability to make contact with people at the level of stories, humor, and fantasy may open the way to true interaction. In the framework of a narrative when telling a story or playing a role, the identity and the dignity of the aged individual can be preserved. Thus the second kind of information can lead to the sharing feelings without exposure, participation without pressure, and acceptance without humiliation.

Personal culture plays a dominant part in the aging process. It is also a key to our understanding of the older person. Since the 1970's, there has been a renewed interest in ethnic diversity. We read with fascination about aging in Colombia, India and Hong Kong (19). But it is easy to forget that great cultural diversity might be present also in a senior center or nursing home in Buffalo, Tampa or Los Angeles. Arthur Koestler called the human being a "holon" or an entity consisting of innumerable complex parts (20). When cultural roots are cut off, an individual might lose the ability to integrate these various parts and to function effectively. Language creates a reality for people. Linguistic isolation of the ethnic aged in an institution might accelerate their descending into a void. Theoretically, we know that increased introversion and preoccupation with memories are processes of aging, but do we act upon this understanding at the time of planning programs? Researchers have charged that formal services do not reach a large segment of the ethnic elderly (21).

John C. Hoffman gave us a thoughtful study of the use of narrative which, in his view, was "both powerful in and central to creative humanness..." (22). Tracing the role of story, parable, myth and fantasy in various social and religious contexts, he came to the following conclusion:

> One of the important and powerful aspects of narrative dynamics was actually the ability to create a structure within which to live while at the same time inviting one to experience the freedom to transcend, to disrupt, to challenge that order... (23).

The use of story, fantasy and play as vehicles for the second kind of information leaves open the possibility for the elderly to challenge a process or a caregiver, while formal communication and technical language leave them helpless.

It is different to develop intergenerational programs for the young-old and for the old-old. The young-old can be self-directive, energetic and participatory. The old-old might be able to communicate only through the channels of the second kind of information. Victor Turner has envisaged three stages in sociocultural development: the Separation (preliminal) stage, the threshold (liminal) stage, and the reaggregation (postliminal) stage. Individuals and population groups who are in transition often speak in poetry, symbolism and the language of the seer (24). When we are close to our life's end, we are in a threshold stage without the possibility of reintegration into society, and thus the language of illusion might be our only way of communication.

Robert Coles, researcher of children in crisis, has something similar to say about the beginning stages of life, these complicated thresholds. Practically all Coles' interviews and observations attest to his belief that at an early age dreams and fantasies help to shape our conceptions of the environment and our place in it (25).

We have seen that many thinkers identified the living strands of culture, language, tradition, myth and dreams as keys to the individual. Data, facts and structured information are what we create. Narrative, parable and fantasy are what we are ourselves.

Does this lead us to some understanding of what the old and the young have to offer to each other in intergenerational programs? I believe it does. After we have completed our need assessment studies, systems analyses and reviews of the professional literature, we can begin to contemplate the fascinating land where the very young and the very old meet. For all of us who sometimes wonder why joint programs for vastly different age groups should work, let me suggest a few characteristics which the old and the young share.

First, the old and the young share a certain freedom of the spirit. Young people are not yet driven by self-images and expectations, and old people have already left these particular human obsessions behind. The uninhibited child is still present in the young and it has returned into the old. One has been set free by the absence of fear and the other by the experience of pain.

Second, spontaneous communication is another way these different generation groups resemble each other. Both this side of and beyond life's hardships one lacks the urge to formulate, define and impress. Sherry Thomas has introduced through oral histories thirteen rural women, among them Irene Nixon, in her 90's. A black former farm hand from Lee County, Georgia, Irene Nixon had to leave the farm when it was sold to agribusiness (26). In her self-narrated history, we encounter the kind of communication that raises no wall between you and the narrator.

Third, the very young and the very old tend to lead a certain uncluttered existence, although this is far from being obvious. Young people, especially in their teens, are almost as tightly programmed for daily and hourly activities as their parents. How can we call their busy existence uncluttered? We can, for two reasons. The imagery of the young is less crowded and more open to unexpected associations. But what makes them, as well as the very old, truly free is that they are not responsible for anybody except for themselves.

Fourth, we may assume that encounters between the old and the young are devoid of self-interest. What tangible benefits could they expect from each other? In fact, we know that at the inception of intergenerational programs many of them are reluctant to participate and some withdraw as soon as possible. But those who remain in contact bring nothing but their uniqueness as individuals to their encounters.

I believe that these similarities in the lives of two very different generations allow them to be more open to each other than they could be to any other age group. Their meeting ground is the realm of imagination and paradoxial relationships that both the very old and very young instinctively understand. They don't try to explain and master everything, and they allow play to carry them to the point of self-transcendence. It is only in parable and fantasy that they can deal with life's unanswerable conflicts ... that they can deal with death. What Aries called "invisible death" in modern society - our tendency is to scorn emotional grief as weakness (27) - would probably be unbearable to both the very old and the very young were they not able to face it in narrative.

As we plan and design intergenerational programs, how could we hope to fathom the needs of the old and the young without understanding the role of the second kind of information?

Let me conclude by citing from a beautiful book by John Birmingham, entitled Granpa (28). The old man and the little girl go on walks together as if exploring all of the sights, sounds, smells and shades of life. Actually, they are tuned into each other rather than into their environment. Their talks are not just dialogues. At one point, the little girl asks "When we get to the beach, can we stay there forever?" He answers: "Yes, but we must go back for our tea at four o'clock." And in this dimension of timelessness and time, the old and the young perfectly understand each other.

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